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SUBJECT: IRI POLLS UNDERSCORE BASESCU'S DOMINANCE OF THE  
ROMANIAN POLITICAL SCENE

Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Tanoue for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A recent IRI opinion survey underscores President Basescu's continuing dominance of the Romanian political scene. A majority of respondents evinced a preference for political stability over early elections. Interestingly, almost as many Romanians support the opposition PSD as the Liberal Party possible future coalition partner for Basescu's Democratic Party (PD). While Romanians remain enthusiastic about long-term economic opportunities afforded by EU integration, few were confident that Romania would be better off within 6 months of EU accession. Party contacts across the board shared a growing view that EU Parliamentary elections next year should be used to gauge voter support prior to plunging into early general elections. The greatest hand-wringing came from PNL leaders, who were openly concerned that the party's recent strategy of breaking ranks with Basescu and the PD over Iraq deployments and purging its most popular party members had failed to improve its poll standings. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) An recent opinion survey (note: complete results sent by e-mail to EUR/NCE) conducted by the International Republican Institute underscored that Romanians remain enthusiastic about long-term economic growth and opportunities afforded by EU integration, remain troubled by poverty and corruption, and are unenthusiastic about early elections. The face-to-face survey was conducted among 1005 respondents nationwide 19-25 September, with a margin of error of 3 percent. The ruling PNL coalition remained the overwhelming favorite of potential voters, with a 44 percent support rate, compared to 23 percent for the PSD and 13 percent for the right-extremist PRM. A strong majority of respondents (61 percent) believed that a candidates post-1989 record was more important than any past history of collaboration with the Securitate; only 26 percent of respondents believed otherwise.

¶3. (SBU) Among coalition partners, voters favored President Basescu's Democratic Party (PD) over Prime Minister Tariceanu's Liberal Party (PNL) by a 57 percent to 31 percent margin. Similarly, President Basescu continued to get high individual marks, with an overall 69 percent favorable rating. The next most popular politicians included former PM Theodor Stolojan (at 59 percent); Gigi Becali (51 percent); Mona Musca (50 percent), PSD President Mircea Geoana (49 percent), and Prime Minister Tariceanu (47 percent). Interestingly, respondents viewed the liberal PNL and left-centrist PSD as virtually interchangeable, with 17 percent of respondents stating a preference for the PNL as their choice for a member of the ruling coalition, and 16 percent favoring the PSD. Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) disagreed with early elections, with only 31 percent favoring early elections.

14. (SBU) The majority of respondents agreed that President Basescu was "more powerful" than Prime Minister Tariceanu, with only 10 percent stating that the PM held more power. Some 60 percent of respondents stated a preference for a presidential republic, compared to 20 percent who favored a parliamentary republic. However, 48 percent of respondents evinced enthusiasm for changing the current "party list" voting system for parliament to a single-member constituency system, with 21 percent favoring no change in the existing system. Institutions receiving high marks from respondents for "serving the Romanian citizens interest" included the church (83 percent); media (74 percent); military (70 percent); the EU (62 percent); the President (58 percent); and NATO (54 percent). Lower marks went to the government (28 percent); Parliament (23 percent) and political parties (17 percent).

15. (SBU) While a large majority (79 percent) believed that foreign investment was either important or very important for the economic future of Romania, nearly half of respondents (46 percent) preferred this investment to come from Europe as opposed to the United States (14 percent). A majority of respondents (62 percent) evinced skepticism about the government's ability to deliver its promises in the fight against corruption, with only 6 percent stating that the government was strongly determined to fight corruption. Similarly, 77 percent of respondents believed that bribes needed to be paid in order to get things done. Only 21 percent felt that economic opportunities had improved since the 2004 elections.

16. (SBU) Respondents also betrayed a strong tinge of cold-war nostalgia, with 48 percent agreeing with the statement that "life was better before 1989"; only 27 percent

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thought living conditions had improved and 16 percent saw no difference. Only 21 percent of respondents evinced confidence that Romania would be better off within 6 months of EU accession; 28 percent felt that Romania would be the same; 39 percent thought the situation would worsen. However, a majority (55 percent) thought Romania's situation would improve 3 years hence; 13 percent said the country would remain the same; 17 percent thought the situation would get worse.

17. (C) This is the first of four polls that IRI will conduct in coming months. IRI Country Director Patrick Sheehan told PolCouns that he held separate sessions to brief the poll numbers to the Presidential Office and major political parties including the PD, PNL, and PSD. He said that the "take-home" message that all of his interlocutors drew from the surveys included voters' strong preference for political stability and distaste for early elections. (note: we believe that respondents' indifference to whether it is the PNL or PSD that is the partner in the ruling coalition underscores that Basescu retains the option of changing coalition partners in the future. end note.) Sheehan said that he detected a growing view among the leading parties the EU Parliamentary elections next year should be used as a barometer of actual voter support with an eye towards providing the data necessary to gauging whether early elections are a desirable option for their respective parties.

18. (C) Sheehan said nearly every party appears to have found something to their liking in the survey results. According to IRI, the Presidential Office staff turned out in force for the briefing session, with some 25 staffers attending. They were reportedly pleased that the IRI surveys reinforced conclusions from their own polling data regarding Basescu's continuing high popularity. The session at PD headquarters elicited a strong response from PD Vice President (and Bucharest Mayor) Adrian Videanu, who reportedly declared that he would personally discuss the polls with President Basescu

and senior PNL leaders with an eye towards buttressing the fraying PD-PNL alliance. PSD President Geoana evinced satisfaction that the polling data reinforced his desire to push his party in a "modern left-centrist" direction (note: he reportedly cited Clinton, Blair, and Schroeder as models).

19. (C) The polls elicited the greatest hand-wringing from PNL leaders, who held a marathon 3-hour session with IRI. PNL members reportedly evinced a bunker mentality, expressing dissatisfaction that the party's recent strategy of breaking ranks with Basescu and the PD over Iraq deployments and of purging its 3 most popular party members had failed to improve their poll standings. Party leaders also expressed concern that the PD might abruptly swap the PSD for the PNL in the ruling coalition. Romanian skepticism over the short-term benefits of EU entry also tracks better with President Basescu's recent statements emphasizing the future challenges of EU entry rather than the more anodyne stance of the Prime Minister, underscoring that the end of post-accession EU-phoria may hurt PM Tariceanu more than the President.

Taubman